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Types of Policy, Features of Cabinets,
and Their Consequences for Policy Outputs**

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON CABINETS AND POLICY-MAKING:

Types of Policy, Features of Cabinets, and Their Consequences for Policy Outputs ¹

ANTONIO LA SPINA

The comparative analysis of governments, which has been the object of a growing attention over the last decade, has begun by concentrating on the "organizational" features of cabinets ² More recently the focus of interest appears to have shifted from the description of the structure of cabinets to the explanation of their functioning. More precisely, the organizational characteristics are still carefully considered, but maybe with a new aim in view. Decision-making by cabinets becomes the *explanandum*, and the effects that structural features have on it should now be part of the *explanans* ³.

This view of cabinets brings with it some fascinating problems: what is the impact, if any, of cabinets on national policy-making? and, conversely, what is the impact on cabinets of the factors that we single out as independent-explanatory variables? what theoretical framework should we use in dealing with these problems?

Bearing such questions in mind, without claiming to offer a satisfactory answer here, the strategy I would like to follow in this paper is to begin with a taxonomy of the policies that can be treated by a cabinet. To this I will add some of the characteristics of the cabinet itself

¹ A first draft of this paper has been discussed in the seminar on Comparative Government held by Jean Blondel at the European University Institute, during my stay as a Jean Monnet fellow. The text has been improved thanks to some suggestions by Jean Blondel himself, Giandomenico Majone, and the linguistic assistance provided by Jennifer Greenleaves. The responsibility for the positions expressed and for possible obscurities and weaknesses is of course entirely mine

² See for example E. Spagna Musso (ed.), *Costituzione e struttura del Governo. Vol. II: L'organizzazione del Governo negli stati di democrazia parlamentare*, Padova, Cedam, 1982; J. Blondel, *The Organization of Governments*, London, Sage, 1982; Id. and F. Müller-Rommel (eds.), *Western European Cabinets*, London, Macmillan, 1988.

³ See the special Issue of the "European Journal of Political Research" (XVI, 1988), edited by J. Blondel and J.L. Thiebault, on *Cabinet Structure and Decision Making Processes in Western Europe*; J. Nousiainen, *Substance and Style of Cabinet Decision-Making*, EUI working paper no. 359, 1988; J. Blondel, *Decisioni di governo e vincoli partitici*, "Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica", XIX, 1989, pp. 199-222.

and of its proximate environments, in order to derive hypotheses about which policies could foreseeably be adopted by which cabinet.

Trying to establish a link between the study of cabinets and the analysis of policy outputs can be useful at least for two reasons. First, policy outputs are the most obvious, the most easily observable, and one of the most important results of the cabinet's operation. They should be taken into account, therefore, if one wishes to test hypotheses about the functioning of a cabinet and how it is affected by structural constraints. The study of policy outputs, then, can be instrumental for such an explanatory purpose. Second, policy outputs and their *explanantia* are relevant in themselves, for instance when in a given country reform of the cabinet is being discussed. Indeed, one of the arguments in favour of the reform could be that the present features of the cabinet are deemed inadequate, or not sufficiently adequate, to favour desired policies (e. g. legislation or administrative measures which respond quickly and effectively to serious and complex social problems), while the alternative features proposed are deemed suitable, or better suited than the existing ones, to obtain those desired policies.

Wilson's Typology of Public Policies

It is possible to distinguish between public policies according to very different criteria: field, scope, ideological colouring, implementing agency, and so on. The idea that has inspired the typologies advanced by some political scientists, such as Lowi, Salisbury and Wilson, is that public policies must be classified according to the conditions in which they are adopted or transformed during the process of adoption. In other words, to each type of policy should correspond, in ideal conditions, a distinctive type of policy-making process ⁴. After Lowi's seminal but analytically unsatisfactory articles, a lively debate has occurred among proponents of various taxonomies ⁵. Here I cannot dwell on the details of

⁴ The seminal works on this respect are some well known articles by Theodore Lowi: *American Business, Public Policy, Case Studies, and Political Theory*, "World Politics", XVI, 1964, pp. 677-715; *Decision Making vs. Policy Making: Towards an Antidote for Technocracy*, "Public Administration Review", XXX, 1970, pp. 314-325; *Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice*, PAR, XXXII, 1972, pp. 298-310.

⁵ See R.H. Salisbury, *The Analysis of Public Policy: A Search for Theories and Roles*, in A. Ranney (ed.), *Political Science and Public Policy*, Chicago, Markham, 1968, pp. 151-175; Id. and J. Heinz, *A Theory of Policy Analysis and Some Preliminary Applications*, in I. Sharkansky (ed.), *Policy Analysis in Political Science*, Chicago, Markham, pp. 39-60; S. Gustavsson, *Types of Policy and Types of Politics*, "Scandinavian Political Studies", 3, 1980, pp. 123-142; F. Kjellberg, *Do Policies*

this debate, nor on the peculiarities of each position. I will refer only to James Wilson's typology, which is, in my view, the most convincing among the ones proposed so far⁶.

Wilson classifies a public policy according to the degree of diffusion or concentration of the costs and benefits which this policy allocates to its addressees. Given different combinations of concentration and diffusion of costs and benefits, the implicit (Downsian) assumption is that politicians usually tend to choose those policies that maximize the likelihood of their staying in office (so, for example, policies that are supposed to lead to electoral gains for them or for their party; or policies that do not threaten the stability of the governmental coalition, endangering ministerial posts thereby), and they avoid policies that imply loss of support, and therefore diminishing that likelihood. Wilson identifies four types of policy and of policy-making process.

a) Policies with concentrated benefits and diffused costs. Such policies will tend to be adopted rather easily, because the potential opponents are, in ideal conditions, a vast and disorganized group of persons (e.g. the taxpayers) not well aware of losing something on that particular issue; conversely, the beneficiaries are few, tend to be easily identifiable, and know that they are getting the benefit. They are expected, therefore, to repay the decision-makers with their gratitude. In order to use a shorter name, I will borrow a term from Lowi and call these policies *distributive*.

b) Policies with concentrated benefits and concentrated costs. Here both costs and benefits fall on small groups, or on categories which are rather numerous, but are already organized (for instance by a trade union). Again, the potential winners know that they are gaining something and are expected to be grateful towards the decision-maker. But now the potential losers, too, know that they could be losing and (if they are not already organized) being few have an incentive to overcome the free-

(Really) Determine Politics? and Eventually How?, "Policy Studies Journal" (special issue), V, 1977, 554-570; P. Steinberger, *Typologies of Public Policy: Meaning Construction and the Policy Process*, "Social Science Quarterly", LXI, 1980, pp. 185-197; G.D. Greenberg et al., *Developing Public Policy Theory: Perspectives from Empirical Research*, "Am. Pol. Sc. Rev.", LXXI, 1977, pp. 1532-1543; R.J. Spitzer, *Promoting Policy Theory: Revising the Arenas of Power*, PSJ, XV, 1987, pp. 675-689; A. Kellow, *Promoting Elegance in Policy Theory: Simplifying Lowi's Arenas of Power*, PSJ, XVI, 1988, pp. 713-724; T.J. Lowi, *An Assessment of Kellow's "Promoting Elegance in Policy Theory"*, PSJ, XVI, 1988, pp. 725-728. For a discussion of Lowi's typology see also A. La Spina, *La decisione legislativa*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1989, pp. 279 ff.

⁶ J.Q. Wilson has proposed his own typology of public policies in his book on *Political Organizations*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, pp. 332 ff., and in *The Politics of Regulation*, in J.W. McKie (ed.), *Social Responsibility and the Business Predicament*, Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1974, pp. 135-168. A more refined version is to be found in *The Politics of Regulation*, in J.Q. Wilson (ed.), *The Politics of Regulation*, New York, Basic Books, 1980, pp. 357-394.

rider problem. So they will organize themselves in order to react and block the undesired policy. It is understandable, then, that such policies imply strong conflict and painful decisions. If there are no particular reasons for pressing these policies (such as the imperative need to adhere to the party program, or exceptional advantages gained from favouring the potential beneficiaries), it will be better to avoid making enemies. This kind of policy, then, could be postponed *sine die* (non-decision); or could be delegated to agencies with no political responsibility; or could be transformed so to accommodate the claims of the opponents. I will call such policies *divisive* ⁷.

c) Policies with diffused benefits and concentrated costs. In the ideal case we have now many beneficiaries, but they belong to a disorganized and "inattentive" group. The potential losers, on the contrary, are attentive and warlike. So, if the policy preference of the decision-maker is not extraordinarily strong, such policies will be (*ceteris paribus*) rare and, even in those cases when they are discussed, will tend to be postponed, delegated, transformed, or framed as "symbolic" policies (that is mere declarations of intention without any actual alteration of the distribution of the payoffs). I will call these policies *regulatory-specific*.

d) Policies with diffused benefits and diffused costs. Here neither the "winners" nor the "losers" are organized. It may also be that the loser and the winner is the same person (for instance a taxpayer who at the same time is also the recipient of an health program). In principle, such policies should be adopted fairly easily, because of the lack of strong opposition. But the decision-maker's motivation could be lacking in turn. As they are not very attentive, the beneficiaries will tend to ignore, or "forget", that the benefit has been allocated by that decision-maker, or that a benefit has been allocated at all. Therefore, despite the wide number of electors affected, the individual representative will not expect to gain huge amounts of votes from such policies. The situation becomes more favourable if these belong to party program, or the government's, or that of some ministries. I will call such policies *general*. If the agenda is crowded, general policies can be postponed, because the decision-makers will prefer not to engage in an effort which is electorally

⁷ Such *purely* divisive policies can be kept logically distinct from ideologically divisive policies, which are discussed in the next paragraph. This means that the conflicting interests of the two groups (that is those who bear the concentrated costs and those who hope to gain the concentrated benefits) are *actually* defined in purely "material" terms. Think, for instance, of a conflict between retail dealers and wholesale dealers over a new law regulating contractual conditions. It must be noticed, however, that in principle *every* governmental measure could be defined or redefined in ideological terms, by recourse to some conception of the public good, and that in practice this is very likely to happen in European politics, where ideological parties are present. Divisive policies, therefore, will tend to be of the ideological kind, rather than the pure kind.

unrewarding, and instead promote policies with more tangible gains. More than other kinds of policy, therefore, the probable adoption of general policies is heavily dependent on the features of the governmental system. If these stress the importance of general programs and allow their implementation, general policies will be frequent. Otherwise, their adoption will become more haphazard.

Addenda: Ideology; Substantive Difficulty

It is not always true that diffused costs or benefits correspond to an "inattentive public". Sometimes a disorganized group is mobilized by a "political entrepreneur", becoming a movement "for" or "against" something. One obvious example quoted by Wilson is Ralph Nader. In such cases one type of policy process is transformed into another. For instance, a policy that *begins*, or could have begun, as regulatory-specific, can *become* divisive if the vast group of people who get the benefits acts in an organized way (with pressure, protests, lobbying, etc.).

An even more complex situation (not considered by Wilson, who deals only with the US case) occurs when the feelings of the public are mobilized *by the parties* through an ideological appeal. "Ideology" is meant here, in a rather loose sense, as a world view organized around a set of identifying values (that can concern religions, ethnic or traditional bonds, class loyalties, political philosophies, etc.). In this case, too, some policy processes concerning diffused benefits or costs will be controversial, rather than smooth, if those benefits or costs are ideologically defined and evoke, therefore, collective identification. So, for instance, a policy that, according to the mere number of the people it benefits and damages, seems to be regulatory-specific or general, could be the result of powerful clashes between ideological stands, and therefore must be labelled divisive, as in the above-mentioned case of the disarticulated group mobilized by an entrepreneur. The role of the entrepreneur, here, is played by the party and its ideology.

There is, however, an important difference. In "idealtypical" divisive policies we have a conflict between some groups, while the political decision makers are pressured and counterpressured by them. In *ideologically divisive* policies, instead, the decision maker *himself*, acting as a representative of a party and its ideological stand, is supposed to be the natural advocate of one of the two conflicting positions. This has relevant consequences for the policy's chances of success. "Pure" divisive policies, as we have seen, are always embarrassing decisions, to be avoided, postponed, delegated or transformed whenever possible. Ideologically divisive policies, on the contrary, often reinforce the identification of party followers, and could therefore be preferred, even if they create some losers (who would never vote for that party anyway). Again, the features of the political system are decisive here. In

"majoritarian" democracies some ideologically divisive policies will have good chances of success. But if the majority supporting the government is composite or consociational (for this terminology see below), these "hot" issues will be systematically avoided, because they would undermine the stability of the coalition.

So far we have spoken about the *political* difficulty of a policy-making decision. But there is also another kind of difficulty. A given policy could be politically uncontroversial, but very complicated if we look at its substantive content. Its political difficulty, therefore, must be kept distinct from its *substantive* difficulty.

Very roughly, we could say that this second kind of difficulty is a function of the seriousness of the problem addressed by the policy under consideration. We have a difficult problem when it is possible to choose between many alternative solutions, when these solutions are complex (because they need time, expert judgment, *ad hoc* and detached knowledge, comparisons, periods of experimentation, cumbersome apparatuses of enforcement, lengthy and sophisticated legal provisions, and so on), and/or when the damage (both in the form of unnecessary costs inflicted or of great benefits unnecessarily squandered) that the policy could provoke in case of a mistake (incorrect definition of the problem, choice of the wrong means, perverse side effects, etc.) is very large.

Again very roughly and tentatively (because some concrete instances could belie the following correlation), we could choose to rank the above said types of policy, according to their degree of substantive difficulty, in the following way: general, regulatory-specific, divisive, distributive, where the general ones are *usually* the more difficult substantively (given the amount of damage that they could produce, and given the frequent complexity of their machinery), and an individual distributive policy is *usually* the easiest, at least from the point of view of the politician (but *many* distributive policies pose, of course, serious substantive problems, for instance of a budgetary kind).

When substantively difficult policies are politically difficult as well (for example, in those cases when they are intended by the actors to be ideologically divisive) it is reasonable to suppose that the chance of an appropriate substantive solution being reached is seriously reduced. The policy will often be delayed, transformed, distorted during the process of its adoption, or framed from the very beginning in a substantively inadequate way, in order to elude the foreseen political difficulties.

Some Advantages of the Policy-Types Approach

As we have seen before, each type of policy takes into account, at the same time, the distinctive logic of a type of policy-making process in "pure" conditions. By adding other conditions to the pure situation we should be able, furthermore, to predict/explain systematically possible alterations to the pure process.

Wilson's typology, compared to other current typologies, is more elegant and exhaustive. It may be said to allow a *formal* analysis of decision-making processes (those which take place in cabinets, in our case), because they are examined in accordance with certain properties they possess, *irrespective of the content* of the policy under discussion. Formality in the sense in which I use it here, however, is less parsimonious than the axiomatic approach followed by mathematically minded scholars allows, because it requires the introduction of numerous and different contextual conditions.

If we consider cabinet policy-making, we can now decompose it in conformity with types of policy pursued. This could enable us, among other things, to be slightly more precise about which decision-making mode or style (e. g. formal, consensual, bargaining, conflictual, authoritative) is likely to be adopted for a given policy; what degree of autonomy or dependence, with respect to parties or to social groups, the cabinet is likely to exhibit on a particular policy; more generally, how the type of policy at issue affects what happens inside the cabinet; and conversely, how the specific attributes of the cabinet affect the way a policy is treated.

The general idea is that the specific attributes of a given cabinet can be seen as obstacles or facilitations to the success of the policies sponsored by its ministers. In this sense, we might as well speak of decision-making *through* cabinet, rather than *in* cabinets. I do not dare to consider the question of whether cabinets decide at all. It is certainly one stage of the policy-making process, though not wholly decisive. But this can be said for any stage of the process. Cabinets decide little. Mostly they ratify decisions already taken elsewhere. But these decisions could have been specified in a peculiar manner - in accordance with the rule of anticipated reactions - because a given cabinet is structured and works in a certain way. Things being so, it makes sense to conclude that the cabinet stage deserves specific attention from students of the policy-process.

If the cabinet's characteristics are to be seen as obstacles or facilitations with reference to the chance of success of the different kinds of policy, it is understandable that the fewer the obstacles the easier the adoption of all kinds of policy. To achieve cabinet support also increases the probability of the bill passing successfully through subsequent stages of the process. Conversely, the presence of obstacles renders the adoption of already controversial policies even more difficult, and consequently these will be more likely to be abandoned or altered (though the alteration

will not probably take place inside the cabinet); or these obstacles will make the insurgence of conflicts within the cabinet more probable. Certain obstacles or facilitations will affect policies of a certain type, and not others, and so on. We then have to consider in more detail the cabinet's characteristics and their impact on the policy process. This will be done by distinguishing three sets: those concerning the way a cabinet works; those concerning the individual members; those concerning the majority supporting the cabinet.

How the Cabinet Works

The first set of features embraces those concerning the internal organization of the cabinet and its normal functioning.

Among these we can mention: i) the number and duration of the cabinet meetings; ii) the norms about the debate taking place inside them (length of speeches, number of interventions allowed, requirement of formal vote, decision rule in case of conflict, e.g. unanimity, simple majority, etc.); iii) the issues normally debated (always broad policies, guidelines or conflict between departments, or also specific issues) and, conversely, those normally excluded from the debate; iv) the style of the debate (type of arguments used, kind of working atmosphere).

As regards point iii, it can be said that generally speaking cabinets are supposed to deliberate on the priorities and strategic lines of governmental action; to function as court of appeal for controversies at the level of intra-cabinet committees, or between ministers; to review selectively some of the policies at issue; to react to the most salient issues emerging from day-to-day politics; to manage the conflicts arising inside the cabinet itself; to go through routine decisions, that is decisions which are formally approved, but not really debated by them.

As regards point iv, the style partly depends on written or unwritten rules about how to conduct the debate, and partly on the personality of the leader and the ministers, but it has also something to do with the overall political culture. This could require, for instance, the use of arguments of a technical-pragmatic type, or, conversely, ones impregnated with ideological and emotional overtones.⁸

If the above-mentioned features are taken as constant and the policy output as variable, we can say that the more cabinet meetings are

⁸ On the subject of decision-making styles, or atmospheres, see H. Eulau, *Decisional Structures in Small Legislative Bodies*, in S.C. Patterson and J.C. Wahlke (eds.), *Comparative Legislative Behavior*, New York, Wiley, 1972, pp. 107-139; see also F. Müller-Rommel, *The Centre of Government in West Germany: Changing Patterns under 14 Legislatures (1949-1987)*, EJPR, XVI, 1988, pp. 171-190.

restricted in number and duration, the debate is limited, the issues debated are general, the style is pragmatic and negotiations take place, the less all kinds of policy are obstructed.

The more cabinet meetings are numerous and lengthy, the debate is free, the issues debated are specific, the style is advocacy/ideological and negotiations are excluded, the more difficulties, *ceteris paribus*, will be met by divisive or regulatory-specific policies and (depending on the type of majority) by ideologically divisive policies, which will tend to be altered during the process.

Another feature that deserves mention, and that differs strongly from country to country, is given by the legal rules on how to apportion issues between new legislation, on the one hand, and administrative measures, on the other; on which measures are the exclusive competence of ministers; and on which need to be ratified, at least formally, by the cabinet. Two extreme situations can be imagined:

- 1) Many kinds of measure reserved to administrative-ministerial competence; no control by the cabinet, not even a formal one. In these cases, obviously, the cabinet does not decide at all, and consequently does not act either as an obstacle or as an aid to the policies at issue.

- 2) General legislative competence; the need for the cabinet to act as a filter, at least in formal terms, for bills sponsored by the government and by individual ministers. In such conditions the cabinet's role can become important, both as a check (in principle on all kinds of policy) and as an aid (for those policies that eventually gain its support).

A third organizational feature is the workload⁹ carried by the cabinet, which partly depends on the rules on competences. Let us imagine three situations:

- 1) If the workload is not huge, an effective review by the cabinet of some *salient* policies becomes possible; this amounts to an obstacle for these policies.

- 2) If its amount is vast, and the control exerted is normally only formal and routine, then on the whole any kind of policy is less likely to be reviewed;

- 3) if its amount is vast, but there is some control, if not by the cabinet itself, at least by the prime minister's staff, then all types of policy are delayed, especially the substantively difficult ones, that require more time to be examined; it is then necessary, for the policy to acquire a favourable position on the agenda, to be or to become salient, hence more visible and maybe ideologically controversial.

⁹ On the topic of a legislature's workload see W.M. Crain, *Cost and Output in the Legislative Firm*, "Journal of Legal Studies", VIII, 1979, pp. 607-621; R.D. Hedlund and P.K. Freeman, *A Strategy for Measuring the Performance of Legislatures in Processing Decisions*, "Legislative Studies Quarterly", 1, 1981, pp. 87-113; and La Spina, *La decisione legislativa*, pp. 333 ff.

The last organizational feature to be mentioned is that of intra-cabinet committees¹⁰. If the workload is heavy, and if the deliberations of such committees are ratified by the cabinet without further discussion, in principle committees allow for a deeper examination of the policies with intersectoral aspects submitted to them, thereby delaying their adoption; but if a bargaining decision-making style is followed, then on average the passing of all kinds of proposals will be eased. More frequently, however, committees exert a substantial check on policy proposals; so, given the rules of competence that prescribe what kind of policy must pass through a committee, some policies could be obstructed, while some others could be eased; if the workload is heavy, uncontroversial but complex general policies can be treated more adequately and quickly by a committee; ideologically divisive, regulatory-specific or divisive policies will find more obstacles; even distributive policies could run into difficulties, because of the need for coherence and coordination stressed in committees.

As the example of interministerial committees shows, not every "obstacle" worsens the substantive quality of a policy under discussion. An obstacle can often delay or block the process, forcing a compromise that will disfigure the original solution, but in other cases it could also impose a more careful deliberation. It is doubtful, however, that, with the exception of what is done in these committees, the cabinet is the proper place in which to submit policies (especially the most complex ones) to a detailed and extensive review.

The Members of the Cabinet

If ministers are specialists (also in the sense of having enjoyed a long tenure in the same department), they will tend to avoid interfering in other ministers' businesses, save in cases of intersectoral policy¹¹. They

¹⁰ See T. Mackie and B. Hogwood (eds.), *Unlocking the Cabinet*, London, Sage, 1985, and the works quoted at footnote 2. For the British case see also I. Jennings, *Cabinet Government*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1959, pp. 250 ff.; C. Seymour-Ure, *The Disintegration of the Cabinet and the Neglected Issue of Cabinet Reform*, "Parliamentary Affairs", XXIV, 1971, pp. 196-207; J.P. Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet*, London, Stevens, 1977, pp. 520 ff. See also P. Waleffe, *Some Constitutional Aspects of Recent Cabinet Development in Great Britain and in Belgium. Prime Minister's Position and Cabinet Committees*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1968. On the so-called "inner cabinet" see, further to the aforesaid works, and with reference to the Italian case, G. Pitruzzella, *Il consiglio di gabinetto nel governo italiano*, "Rivista trimestrale di diritto pubblico", 3, 1985, pp. 639-677.

¹¹ The differences between "specialists" and "amateurs" is treated in Blondel, *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World*, London, Sage, 1985, pp. 189 ff.

will also tend to favour policies serving the interests of the groups closest to the department, hence policies which contain concentrated benefits, even if shaped as general. Some departments have competence in matters where only concentrated benefits are allocated; others have a responsibility for policies of a more comprehensive kind. Ministers can sometimes be willing to allocate concentrated costs, especially if these fall on groups which are not among the clients of the department (but in this case they can expect the opposition from other ministers, whose clients stand to be the potential losers). Otherwise, they will normally tend to avoid such choices, or to compensate the losers by transforming the concentrated costs into diffused ones. This transformation, however, takes place in pre-cabinet stages, in "iron triangles" or "policy communities".

Ministers with a short tenure will tend not to interfere with policies perceived as belonging to other departments.

Well staffed ministers will be more effective in pursuing their policies, even in case of opposition by other ministers, and will also be more effective in understanding which policies put forward by others could damage their interests.

Ministers with a party-political origin, who carry a certain weight in their party or faction, and have occupied different posts during their ministerial career, will be more inclined to interfere with other ministers' proposals; this will create difficulties for ideologically divisive, regulatory-specific and divisive policies, which could be opposed also by ministers belonging to the same party as their proponent.

The role of the premier must also be considered. Normally he is *not* interested in specific policies, with the exception of broad questions of economic and foreign policy and issues rendered urgent by contingent events. Nevertheless, if he can use (formally or informally) effective powers in steering and closing the debate, and he is well staffed, he can, to a certain extent, allow the expression of certain conflicts inside the cabinet, which will eventually be overcome thanks to the authority of the prime minister; in this case, policies not consistent with the government program, or with the prime minister's preferences, will be ruled out, be they controversial or not; some controversial policies (pure divisive, regulatory specific or ideologically divisive, which in this case are controversial *in society*, but normally not inside the cabinet) will be supported.

If the prime minister has few steering powers and his position is weak, all controversial policies (divisive, regulatory specific, ideologically divisive) will be avoided, unless exceptional circumstances force the government to deal with them ¹².

¹² See R. Rose and E.N. Suleiman (eds.), *Presidents and Prime Ministers*, AEI, Washington D.C., 1981. For a typical case of a weak Prime Minister see S. Cassese, *Is there a Government in Italy? Politics and Administration at the Top*, in Rose-Suleiman; E. Spagna Musso (ed.), *Costituzione e struttura del Governo. Vol. I: Il problema della Presidenza del Consiglio*, Padova, Cedam, 1979; Pitruzzella, *Il Presidente del Consiglio*

Types of Supporting Majority

The type of majority supporting the government is probably the most relevant variable to be considered. It affects in a powerful and systematic way both the decision-making process inside the cabinet itself (as well as some of the two sets of features discussed above) and the chances of success of the different types of policy in the subsequent parliamentary discussion. Here we will consider only the first aspect.

I will distinguish three types of majority ¹³:

- 1) compact: one party or more than one party, usually ideologically adjacent, and in a durable partnership; if the compact majority is coalitional, its durability could sometimes depend on the ideological position of the partners, which forces the choice of a given majority, or could also be the result of appropriate rules (e.g. the German "constructive" no-confidence vote);
- 2) composite: at least two, but normally more than two parties ideologically more heterogeneous, in a very unstable partnership; the size of the supporting majority is small; durability-inducing rules are absent or ineffective;
- 3) consociational: very large majority, with strong ideological distance between members, in a rather unstable partnership.

1) *Ceteris paribus*, compact majorities are likely to favour:

- many general policies;
- some divisive policies, pure and ideological (both if consistent with the government platform and/or with the premier's policy preferences);
- some regulatory-specific policies;
- many distributive policies (but not so many if the financial check is effective and the allocation of the diffused costs implied is not consistent with the government platform).

With compact majorities the government platform is likely to be detailed, legitimized by direct electoral support, influential. Some groups in society (those whose support is crucial for the reelection) will be very influential in cabinet decisions. The stand taken by the majority party, or parties, will influence cabinet's decisions on visible and ideologically salient issues. Sometimes, however, also the reverse could happen: since

e l' organizzazione del governo, Padova, Cedam, 1986; Id., *L' organizzazione amministrativa della presidenza del consiglio*, "Foro italiano", 6, 1989, pp. 371-384.

¹³ A more diffused discussion of the types of majority is in La Spina, *La decisione legislativa*, pp. 338 ff. See also G. Loewenberg and S.C. Patterson, *Comparing Legislatures*, Boston, Little-Brown, 1979, pp. 213 ss. The term "consociational" is of course drawn from the works of A. Lijphart, such as *Consociational Democracy*, "World Politics", XXI, 1968-69, pp. 207-225; *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-one Countries*, New Haven-London, Yale Univ. Press, 1984.

the ministers are also party leaders, they can in turn shape party attitudes. On the whole, cabinet decision-making is relatively autonomous and the cabinet tends to be seen more as a working than as a discussing body (but this depends also on the specific attributes of the ministers and of their organization).

2) Composite majorities, again *ceteris paribus*, favour:

- some general policies (only if they get on the agenda and are not controversial; if ideological distances between the partners are present, such policies could meet more difficulties);
- very few divisive policies, pure and ideological (often transformed through diffusion of the costs);
- a minimum of regulatory-specific policies (possible only if the losers belong to sectors of society not represented among the parties of the coalition, or through sleights of hand; usually, they will be transformed into mixed or symbolic policies)
- many distributive policies.

The government program is likely to be vague, not supported by direct electoral assent, not very influential, and will be neglected if necessary. Many groups will be influential, but they will normally succeed only in blocking undesired policies. Having desired policies approved is much more difficult, if they imply concentrated or ideologically defined costs; not so for distributive policies. The parties are very influential, but again more in blocking policies than in pushing them; so, many decisions are party or group dependent. The autonomy of the premier and that of the cabinet lies only in the management of conflict they operate, and, even more, in setting the agenda so as to avoid in a systematic way controversial issues that would destroy the coalition. The cabinet tends to be also a discussing body.

3) Consociational majorities, *ceteris paribus*, favour:

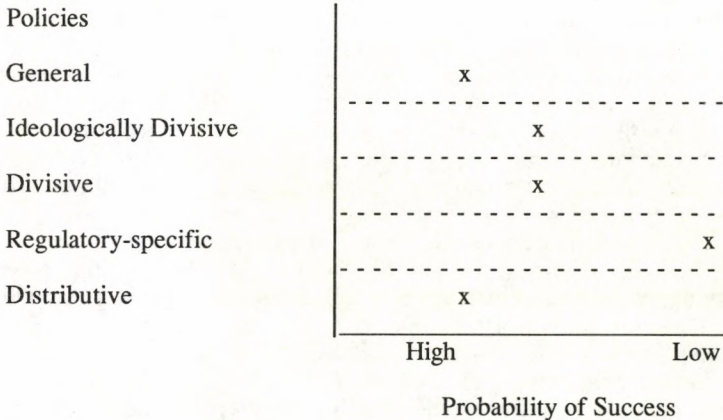
- many general policies (provided that these stress only unifying values, presenting themselves as ideological omnibus, and have a strong symbolic impact; ideologically divisive policies, or policies framed in a divisive way, must be excluded);
- few divisive policies;
- few regulatory-specific policies (both pure divisive and regulatory-specific policies will be approved only if they are essential points of the government program; if possible, they will be transformed into mixed or symbolic policies);
- many distributive policies.

The government program will be extensive, will include some "major reforms", will be rich in declarations of principle and intent, but more vague in terms of policy choices. It is not directly legitimized by electoral support, and influential only to a certain extent. Many social groups will be influential in blocking the allocation of concentrated costs or in pushing for concentrated benefits, if these do not imply concentrated costs. The parties, or better the agreements reached between them, will be

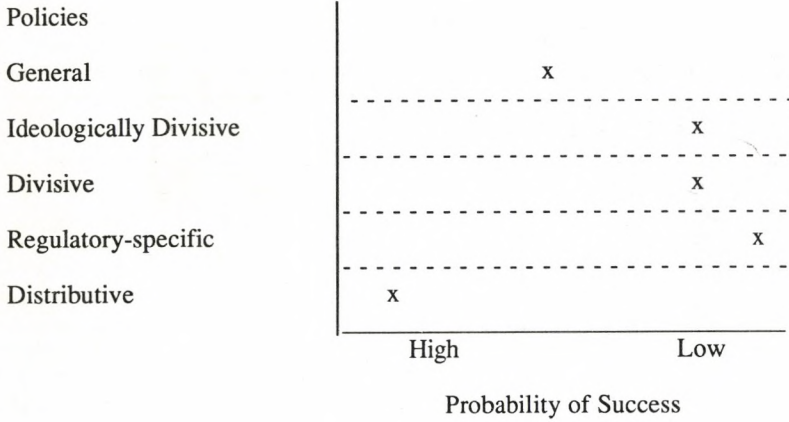
very influential, even in agenda setting. If the parties are interested in the survival of the consociational coalition, they will normally try to obtain trade-offs benefiting all the members of the coalition, but it will not be possible to push too many controversial policies too hard; rather, they will try to reshape potentially conflictual proposals, both in parliamentary discussion and, to a lesser extent, in cabinet work. The cabinet will sometimes be seen also as a debating body.

The following pictures sum up the impact of the kind of majority on policy outputs (procedural constraints are not considered):

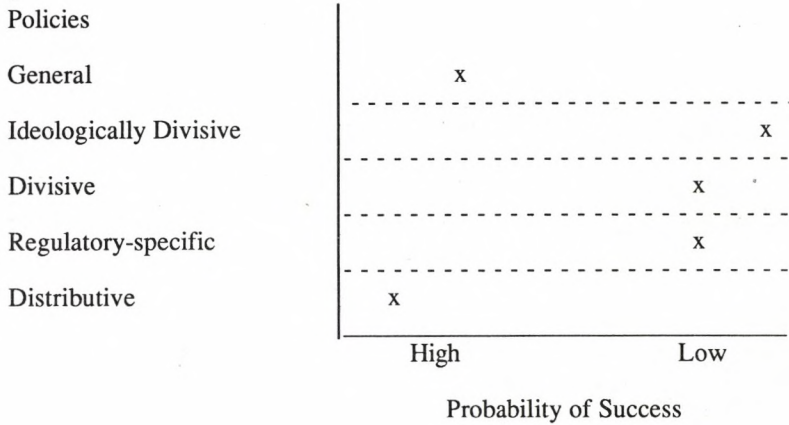
Compact Majority



Composite Majority



Consociational Majority



Conclusions

The "predictions" derived so far from the correlation between types of policy and cabinet's features are of course only hypotheses which need to be tested and refined by careful analysis of the policy outputs of existing cabinets. Let us suppose, for a moment, that such an analysis does not disprove those hypotheses. If we consider what appears to be the most relevant variable, the supporting majority (whose impact could be modified in part by some of the other variables), we see that the performances of the three types of majority should differ greatly.

Composite majorities fare well only on distributive policies, that is those policies that an external observer would probably consider the most trivial, from the point of view of their substantive difficulty, and the least relevant socially. Consociational majorities fare better than composite ones on general policies (but not on regulatory-specific and divisive ones). It must be remembered, however, that now the guidelines of such policies will have to be agreed upon by a number of parties, whose ideological stands could collide at various points. The decision-makers, therefore, will stress unifying and vague principles, avoiding disturbing ends and means. This could seriously diminish the substantive accuracy of the general policies passed thanks to a consociational majority.

Compact majorities appear to be the best suited to obtain policies which are both substantively and politically difficult. They are not, *per se*, suited to avoiding an abundance of distributive policies, but this result could be reached by means of procedural and financial constraints. It should not be forgotten, however, that the majority now has a free hand to "impose" its ideological definitions of the policies at issue. The risk of a "tyranny" exerted by the representatives of the majority is more present than in composite majorities (consociational majorities indeed imply the same risk, although to a different degree). Yet, this evil could also be avoided, for example by introducing a detailed and rigid constitution and a constitutional court, which would restrain the policy-makers' freedom of manœuvre in certain areas. These, however, are problems to be treated first by political philosophers, and then by constitutional engineers. Even if the expectation of different policy outputs from different cabinet characteristics in accordance with the model sketched here was corroborated by empirical evidence, it would not follow immediately which set of attributes is to be preferred in a cabinet.



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